

Federal Embryo Research Is Backed

Ethicists See Benefits Overriding Qualms

By Rick Weiss
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A presidentially appointed ethics panel has decided to recommend that the federal government begin funding some research on human embryos, saying the moral cost of destroying embryos in research is outweighed by the social good that could come from the work.

Citing recent evidence that some human embryo cells have the potential to grow into replacement tissues to treat a wide variety of chronic diseases, the National Bioethics Advisory Commission has concluded that it is essentially unfair to millions of patients for Congress to continue its broad, four-year-old funding ban on human embryo research.

Instead, federal rules should be written that ensure an appropriate measure of protection and respect for human embryos, according to a draft version of the report and interviews with commissioners and others. Those rules would allow federally financed researchers to conduct studies on leftover embryos from fertility clinics if the embryos were no longer wanted by the parents who made them.

"These are very difficult judgments to make, but it's a balancing act," said Harold T. Shapiro, chairman of the bioethics commission and president of Princeton University. "We have moral obligations to the future health and welfare of people, and we need to balance these with, at the very least, the symbolic moral obligation we have to the embryo."

The recommendations go further than those recently proposed by the National Institutes of Health. Those call for federally funded research on laboratory-grown human embryo cells, but not on human embryos themselves.

The more conservative NIH recommendations already have drawn fire from some members of Congress. Observers said the bioethics commission's report is likely to escalate the long-standing political tussle over the moral status of embryos and the wrenching national debate over abortion.

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Panel Backs Federal Embryo Research

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"I have a sense that this is going to be one of the liveliest debates on the Senate and the House floors this session," said Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.), who last fall held a hearing on stem-cell research.

Contentious as the issue is, there are signs that public opinion may be moving toward support of at least limited embryo research.

"Patients and their families faced with life-threatening and chronically disabling diseases want science to move as quickly as possible," said Daniel Perry, executive director of the Alliance for Aging Research and chief of a new coalition of patient groups advocating research on human embryonic stem cells, the embryo-derived cells that have generated so much recent excitement.

The new group, Patients' Coalition for Urgent Research, or CURE, includes more than two dozen national organizations, such as the American Cancer Society and the Christopher Reeve Paralysis Foundation. At an inaugural event last week, the group released poll results indicating that 74 percent of Americans support human embryonic stem-cell research.

"We're not naive and we know there's not going to be a cure tomorrow," Perry said. "But it's a good thing for federal funding to be there because it means the research will be done more quickly and it will be more accountable to the public."

The commission's report, due to be released next month, is the second federal ethics analysis in less than five years to conclude that certain kinds of research on human embryos warrant federal support. The previous one, by a panel convened by the NIH, was partially approved by President Clinton in 1994 but then rejected by Congress, which passed an appropriations rider blocking all such funding and has renewed that ban annually ever since.

The 17-member bioethics commission calls for a more limited range of embryo experiments than did the 1994 panel. It does not support the use of federal funds to create new human embryos just for research, for example—the single provision that Clinton rejected in 1994—and it offers specific policy guidelines to keep studies within narrow scientific and ethical bounds.

But the biggest difference between 1994 and 1999, experts said, is that the benefits of embryo research are now far less theoretical. If the morality of human embryo research is pegged in part to the benefits that are likely to accrue to sick and dying people, as many ethicists, religious leaders and others believe, then the tipping point of acceptability appears to have been reached, the report concludes.

"This research is allied with a noble cause," the draft report states, "and any taint that might attach from the source of the stem cells diminishes in proportion to the potential good which the research may yield."

The commission's report is still undergoing revision. But interviews with commissioners

and others involved in its crafting indicate that a clear consensus exists for some basic recommendations.

For now, the report will say, federal funding should be made available only for research on embryos made by in vitro fertilization for infertile couples. A single cycle of IVF can result in the creation of a dozen or more embryos, of which three or four typically are transferred to the womb. The rest are frozen for later efforts. Under the report's recommendation, if any are left over when the couple stops trying to get pregnant, the couple could donate them for federal research (or have them destroyed or keep them frozen indefinitely).

Federally funded scientists would be allowed to ask parents for permission to conduct studies on their embryos only after the parents

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had independently decided to abandon them. And if any compensation were to be allowed, it would be very limited.

With protections such as these in place, the commission concludes, parents—and not the federal government—would be "morally responsible" for the embryos' demise.

Most commissioners also favor creation of a national oversight board that would be responsible for ensuring that only those embryo experiments deemed most worthy get federal support.

The commission concedes that it cannot settle the debate over embryos' intrinsic moral value. But for the purposes of making public policy, it seeks to find an ethical middle ground by balancing the potential harm to embryos against the potential benefits to patients.

The commission notes, for example, that even many conservatives support abortion

under certain circumstances. "Conservatives who accept that killing a fetus is permissible where it is necessary to save the life of the mother should agree with liberals that it is also permissible to destroy embryos where it is necessary to save people."

The new analysis comes at a time of growing public clamor for full-bore pursuit of research into human embryonic and fetal stem cells—cell types discovered just last year that have the potential to grow into many kinds of tissues. Researchers envision cultivating the cells into replacement neurons for patients with Parkinson's disease, insulin-secreting cells for diabetics, and heart muscle cells for victims of heart attacks, among other uses.

But it wasn't only advances in science that led the commission to decide it is time to invite federal investment in embryo research, said Eric Meslin, the commission's executive director. Since the 1994 NIH report, Meslin said, people have been reconsidering their feelings about embryo research. A growing number seem to have found room within their personal belief systems to justify limited amounts of such research—including many religious leaders who testified to the commission.

"The community has been coming to the view that these sources of cells are ethically acceptable with a number of protections put in place," Meslin said.

Many also favor a federal presence in the stem-cell field so research priorities will be selected on the basis of what is best for the nation's health and welfare, instead of on the basis of maximum profitability for the companies now pursuing the technology with private money.

The American Society for Reproductive Medicine, the professional organization that oversees fertility clinics, where most of the nation's uncounted thousands of spare embryos are stored in freezers, expressed support for the commission's conclusions.

"We would certainly welcome federal funding and oversight for research involving human embryos and human embryonic stem cells, and we would hope that Congress would act on the commission's recommendation," said Sean Tipton, a spokesman for the organization in Washington.

But others, including antiabortion activist John Cavanaugh-O'Keefe of the Laytonville, Md.-based Eugenics Watch, vowed to fight the move. And congressional support is hardly assured. Rep. Jay Dickey (R-Ark.), a co-author of the rider that has banned embryo research since 1995, said through a spokesman that he strongly opposes the commission's views.

"Any NIH action to initiate funding of such research would violate both the letter and spirit of the federal law banning federal support for research in which human embryos are harmed or destroyed," Dickey wrote in a recent letter to Health and Human Services Secretary Donna E. Shalala.